

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768)

Winckelmann and Lessing. Like Gottfried Lessing, and many of his German contemporaries, Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768) took his deepest impulses from the Classical World, which was of course at the center of academic education in eighteenth century Europe and England, and served as the conventional pathway to the higher careers in the University and in the Church. In fact, when you consider Lessing's *Laokoon*, you may say that for both Winckelmann and Lessing the plastic arts of the Greeks and Romans formed the text of supreme importance. For Winckelmann the preoccupation with the Greeks, in particular, became the leitmotif of his life.

Winckelmann the man. Who was Johann Winckelmann? He was born in Stendahl, the son of a cobbler, of a mother who was daughter of a weaver; Winckelmann's childhood was hard and simple, but his academic drive to learn was powerful, and prevailed to gain him a solid classical education at two private gymnasia, from where at age 21 he went on to study Theology at the University of Halle. It was obvious, though, that Winckelmann was no theologian; he turned instead to classical languages, but was unsatisfied with the instruction he found, and moved on, in sequence, to try his hand at a school teaching job, to do private tutoring—where as often he fell in love with a handsome young man, whom he was tutoring, and was rejected—and then to work as curator of the private library of Count von Bunau, an opportunity to extend his reading of contemporary Enlightenment as well as ancient Greek thought. From this point on, Winckelmann's trajectory was to be toward the lands of antiquity, especially Rome, that were targets for all German creators of his time. In 1754, in a well planned move, Winckelmann joined the Catholic Church, and with a grant from the Elector of Saxony left for Rome, and a sequence of posts with Papal dignitaries and Roman noble families. With the support of such agents, for work as a resident art historian and critic, and especially as a brilliant forerunner in archeological methods, Winckelmann remained in Rome until 1768, when he returned to the north, was totally depressed by it, and was in Trieste, on his way back to Italy, when he was murdered.

Winckelmann's masterwork. *The History of Art in Antiquity* (1764) was the most influential of Winckelmann's many works on ancient Greek art—especially on the examples of ancient Greek (and fake Greek and Roman) sculpture which were abundant and widely sought out in the Rome of the time. Winckelmann's History was a testimony to the beauty and ideal sensuality of the ancient Greek figure, and artist. In that art Winckelmann found what he called 'a noble simplicity and a quiet greatness,' and from the model of such art he wished to inspire his contemporaries in their quest to honor and depict the beauty of the human form. (Winckelmann stressed the brilliance of the ancient Greek sculptor, in rendering the essence of the depicted figure without any suggestion of the veins, muscles, nerves which lay under the surface, and in place of which the Greek genius like Phidias was able to strike right for the essence of the human, which was like 'the purest water from the center of the well.')

Like Lessing, Winckelmann turned to the ancient world for spiritual direction in the 'modern world.' From the time of these two great pioneers of Enlightenment, German culture was to remain preoccupied with Antiquity, especially with the Greek example. The inspired descriptive writing, with which Winckelmann drives his History, puts him in the first rank of the German literary minds of his time, as it made him the first widely popular German writer throughout European culture.

Reading

Primary source reading

North, J.H., *Winckelmann's 'Philosophy of Art': A prelude to German Classicism*, 2012.

Secondary source reading

Nisbet, ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller, Goethe*, 2009.

Further reading

Butler, E. M., *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany*, 1935; reprinted in 2012. (A classic study.)

Original language reading

Stolpe, Heinz, *Aufklaerung, Fortschritt, Humanitaet: Studien und Kritiken*, 1989.

Suggested paper topics

Winckelmann puts much stress on the 'imitation' (Nachahmung) of the greatest works of Greek art, especially sculpture. In fact his greatest work is consciously devoted to that 'imitation.' What does he mean by that? Does he suggest a creative kind of imitation, by which the imitator raises himself to a higher level of humanity? Or is he following another tradition, by which 'art is thought of as the imitation of nature,' the precise representation?

The Enlightenment is a pan European movement with many meanings, all of which have to do with the modernization of European culture—in science, political and social thought, and art. Why do you suppose the influence of the ancient Classics was so coercive at this time? What was the particular driver behind the German form of this return to the Classical? How does the aesthetic humanism, which bursts out in Germany, relate to the formality of the contemporary French classical theater of Corneille and Racine?

EXCERPT On the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture

<http://www.arthistoryspot.com/2009/12/johann-joachim-winckelmann-reflections-on-the-imitation-of-greek-works-in-painting-and-sculpture/>

Good taste, which is becoming more prevalent throughout the world, had its origins under the skies of Greece. Every invention of foreign nations which was brought to Greece was, as it were, only a first seed that assumed new form and character here. We are told that Minerva chose this land, with its mild seasons, above all others for the Greeks in the knowledge that it would be productive of genius.

The taste which the Greeks exhibited in their works of art was unique and has seldom been taken far from its source without loss. Under more distant skies it found tardy recognition and without a doubt was completely unknown in the northern zones during a time when painting and sculpture, of which the Greeks are the greatest teachers, found few admirers. This was a time when the most valuable works of Correggio were used to cover the windows of the royal stables in Stockholm.

One has to admit that the reign of the great Augustus was the happy period during which the arts were introduced into Saxony as a foreign element. Under his successor, the German Titus, they became firmly established in this country, and with their help good taste is now becoming common. An eternal monument to the greatness of this monarch is that he furthered good taste by collecting and publicly displaying the greatest treasures from Italy and the very best paintings that other countries have produced. His eagerness to perpetuate the arts did not diminish until authentic works of Greek masters and indeed those of the highest quality were available for artists to imitate. The purest sources of art have been opened, and fortunate is the person who discovers and partakes of them. This search means going to Athens; and Dresden will from now on be an Athens for artists.

The only way for us to become great or, if this be possible, inimitable, is to imitate the ancients. What someone once said of Homer—that to understand him well means to admire him—is also true for the art works of the ancients, especially the Greeks. ..